

SEPTEMBER 18, 2005 REPRESENTATIVE SCHAKOWSKY DELIVERED THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT IN SKOKIE AT A CEREMONY COMMEMORATING THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF CONCENTRATION CAMPS

SKOKIE, IL -- Statement by Representative Schakowsky on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of concentration camps.

I stand here today in solidarity with our Jewish community around the world that is recognizing the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. Skokie is home to one of the largest concentrations of survivors in the country and the largest, in Illinois. This anniversary holds deep meaning for survivors, for all who were touched by the Holocaust and by those who have taken up the vow to commemorate the Shoah and its end each year. I am very grateful and deeply honored to be here with several of those who themselves risked so much to liberate the concentration camps.

At first I thought about reminding us all about the terrible genocide that has been taking place in Sudan, and the need to combat hatred and discrimination wherever it exists. But because we are here today to recognize a "celebration of life" I want to tell you the story of a Chicago congregation, a Torah, and a small town in the Czech Republic.

Congregation Hakafa in Glencoe has in its possession a Torah from a Jewish community in the Czech Republic that was wiped out by the Nazis during World War II. The community was located in the small town of Lostice in the province of Moravia. For the 350 years of its existence, it lived in harmony with its non-Jewish neighbors and participated in the greater Lostice economy, civic life, and the like.

Two years ago Hakafa's rabbi, Rabbi Bruce Elder, received a call from a man in California, Dr. Stanton Canter, who had traveled through the Czech Republic several years before. During those travels Dr. Canter came across the rural town of Lostice and was astounded to discover that, although there had been no Jews there since they were rounded up by the Nazis around 1939, the non-Jewish residents had maintained the town's Jewish cemetery and repaired the old synagogue which had been partially destroyed by Hitler's army. Through extensive research, Dr. Cantor determined that the Torah in Hakafa's possession had originated from this small Czech town.

Dr. Canter called had called Rabbi Elder to ask if he could take a picture of the Torah in their

ark and send it to the mayor of Lostice. That summer the town of Lostice celebrated its 450th anniversary and was holding a celebration in the synagogue, now used for public events from time to time, to mark the occasion. Rabbi Elder sent a picture along with a note of appreciation. The picture and note now hang on the wall of the synagogue, and Lostice's mayor sent Hakafa an invitation to visit sometime. Rabbi Elder gladly accepted the invite.

In late March of this year, Rabbi Elder had contacted me ask my assistance in transporting the Torah safely back to Lostice for a visit. As it turns out, nobody had ever successfully returned a Torah to the Czech Republic. Working with Congressman Tom Lantos, who himself is a Holocaust survivor and the ranking Democrat on the International Relations Committee, and DHL shipping corporation who agreed to ship the 125 pound crated Torah for free, we were able to make this amazing voyage a reality. Rabbi Elder, members of Hakafa Congregation, and the Torah arrived in Lostice on June 17th.

Even after the exchange of letters with the town's mayor the delegation from Chicago was unprepared for what awaited them in Lostice. Some 150 non-Jewish residents and a few Jews from surrounding areas turned out to greet them, along with the mayor and community leaders. In addition a handful of Jews from Prague had heard about the event and traveled to Lostice to be a part of it.

The crowd traveled with the Hakafa delegation through the streets of the city to the synagogue, where the Torah was placed in the Ark for the first time since the late 1930s.

In this setting, the ceremonies began with a Shabbat service during which the Torah was, for the first time since it originally left Lostice, unscrolled to the portion of the week, which Elder and other congregants read to a packed audience.

The Lostice mayor and other community leaders participated as well, along with a representative of the Prague Jewish community and one from the U.S. embassy. A children's choir from the town, most of whom had never met a Jew in their lives, had learned Jewish songs for the occasion and sang them at the service. It was a highly emotional and spiritual event for all involved.

After the service the congregants spread the Torah out on a table and mingled with the guests

at a reception, which also included an exhibit of Jewish art that had been hung on the synagogue walls. For an hour and a half, people walked past the Torah, looking at it and taking pictures of it. They didn't want to leave.

Because our time here today is limited I can only share with you the general overview of this amazing event. I knew, from the moment that Rabbi Elder contacted me that this story would have a huge educational impact and would be able to engage so many people's hearts, governments and beyond. This was truly an event that can be used as evidence that tolerant coexistence of people with different religious and racial backgrounds was, and is, possible.

Perhaps most importantly, the Respect and Tolerance Foundation, founded by Dr. Cantor in the Czech Republic, is going around the country teaching about the Holocaust to children in public schools who don't even know what the Holocaust is, and they're listening. □ It is uplifting to know that lessons of the Holocaust and the concept of "never forget" are actually being applied in today's world.□

Today we honor and mourn those who perished. At the same time we honor and respect those who survived and those who fought to save them. We must all vow to live our lives in a way that pays tribute to the memories of those we lost and ensures others will not suffer their fate. To celebrate life we must work together to protect and improve life for all at every opportunity. This means embracing the notion of "Tikkun Olam", or healing the world. Those brave soldiers who liberated the concentration camps, and those who survived them, have accepted that notion. We must all follow their lead and celebrate life at every opportunity.

It is an honor to be here with you today. Thank you.